

Case Study: Commonwealth Essay Competition

Partner: Royal Commonwealth Society

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Introduction

'I did not just want to focus on the superficial meaning of the title, but I wanted to give a sense of my own identity and culture ... Words to me are like a blank canvas, a medium to amplify my worldview and shape my own spheres; I consider this a form of empowerment.' - Amanda Chong, Singapore, 2004 top-winner

The Commonwealth Essay Competition was first established in 1883 and has been running continuously since 1913. It has developed tremendously over the past 94 years, reflecting the changes in the international system. From being a tool for the articulation of an imperial ideology, the project has developed into a truly post-colonial endeavour which encourages the discussion of matters of concern within and between the world's nation states. Judging by the quality and quantity of entries, the project provides a unique space for reflection and creativity which is highly valued by the young people of the Commonwealth.

Activity

The Commonwealth Essay Competition is an annual, international youth writing contest for students aged 8-18 in all Commonwealth countries and territories organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS). It is open to primary and secondary schools and currently receives more than 6,000 final entries from 1,350 schools in 54 Commonwealth countries and territories. The Competition sets relevant and interesting topics in four age categories, with five prizes in each category in the form of a financial reward. The entries are judged by 24 examiners with a background in education or writing, and around one-third of all entries receive a certified award of commendation; these serve both as an acknowledgement of hard work and talent and an encouragement to further skills development.

Each school may submit a maximum of four entries per age category, selected by a teacher or principal. Since many schools ask a whole or several classes to write an assignment based on the Commonwealth Essay Competition topics, the Royal Commonwealth Society estimates conservatively that the real number stands at a minimum of 54,000 participants every year.

The prize winners have their written pieces featured in local media across the Commonwealth and in reference books for policy-makers. In addition, local

Validation and Recognition

supporters organise high- or low-profile prize giving events; in recent years these have taken place in Australia (every year), Canada (every year), Cayman Islands (2005), Malta (2005), Mauritius (2005 and 2006), Nigeria (in 2003, 2005 and 2006) and Singapore (2004).

The project has grown tremendously in the past years. Between 2004 and 2007 the numbers of students and schools taking part rose by 22 per cent and 23 per cent respectively. At the same time, the RCS has experienced a strengthening of its relationship with the schools: they respond to requests and are eager to be further involved in RCS activities.

Impact

The Commonwealth Essay Competition promotes the use of English in an enjoyable way while encouraging young people to research the given topics thoroughly, think analytically, generate their own ideas and express them in a creative manner.

It enables young people from a wide variety of scholastic and social backgrounds to compete on equal terms with their peers from around the world and provides hundreds of schools throughout the Commonwealth with the opportunity to take part in a unique educational project. All socio-economic brackets are represented in the project, from village schools in Bangladesh and Botswana to elite schools in South Africa and Singapore.

The short-term and long-term impacts of the project also include:

- The recognition of talented and/or hard-working children and young people.
- The encouragement of literacy, language proficiency and writing and IT skills and the nurture of ambition, creativity and curiosity.
- An increase in young people's knowledge about issues that affect their communities, countries and the world today (for example, human rights and globalisation).
- Awareness about the values and countries of the Commonwealth.
- The opportunity for schools to take part in an international project.
- A raised awareness of the importance of literacy and education as a way of improving life conditions.
- The empowerment of children by giving them a voice and confidence in expressing their thoughts through writing.
- The creation of a network that will connect talented young people from across the world.

Lessons

Giving young people the means to take their lives into their own hands and believe in themselves helps encourage an active and global citizenry and is thereby a subtle force for positive change.